

[I Saw the Stars]

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I SAW THE STARS

"When I was two years old my father and mother separated. There were two children, my sister, four years old, and myself. We went to live with our grandparents while my mother went to Savannah, Georgia, to work. My father went away too. Scattered in another direction.

"I was born March 26, 1882, three and a half miles north of Marietta, Cobb County, Georgia, at the side of Kennesaw Mountain. Judge Kennesaw Mountain Landis was named for the mountain. Judge Landis was a Federal judge and an outstanding figure in baseball. His father was killed in the Kennesaw Mountain. I was named for my grandfather, who had fourteen children, of which my father was the oldest.

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"For seven years we lived with our grandparents who had, as I told you before, fourteen children. A good many of them were grown and at times they would have other children. For instance the oldest boy married, brought his wife and children there, and there was also an aunt whose husband took down sick and died and they came out there with their family to live with my grandfather. This aunt and her husband had seven boys living and one more child was born after the husband died. I merely mention this to give you an idea of what a large family ours was. And all of these people lived in two log cabins that had three rooms and a hall. The family was very, very poor and with so many you can perhaps imagine 2 that we merely existed. This is about all I can remember about the family.

"Of what I can remember of life for these first seven years is that we went to a country school three miles in a year, walked several miles to this school, and I was in the first reader. One teacher taught all of the pupils from what we considered the first reader to the fifth reader and that was about as high as they want.

"Most of the things I remember learning during that seven-year period were things about nature and its surroundings. I became interested in birds, animals, cattle, trees, and even the mountain that was close by. I doubt that I learned anything in a literary was during those seven years, except such things that were in the first reader. I remember that.

"My mother never forgot us. She used to come once or twice a year and bring us clothes. She was only twenty years older than I was. I was very fond of my mother and cried after her all of the time. I think it touched her heart and she hated to go away and leave me.

"When I was nine years old she came and took us, my sister and me, to Savannah, Georgia. I was put in the second grade in Savannah. As I remember it was kinda hard for me to catch on to the things in the second grade. At the end of the school term I was promoted. I was then thereafter leader in the class, from the third grade on up.

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"One of my early impressions of things that linger was that my mother dressed me very nicely, put clean clothes on me, and took me to Sunday school and church. I still remember the impressions that were made upon me by the church influence. When I was about eleven or twelve years old I found out that my mother wasn't going to keep me in school as she was unable to buy me clothes, shoes, and keep me in school. There was a white lady who had a job for me. I was in the fifth grade then. I was willing to work but I couldn't help but break down and cry when she told me she would hire me, as I wanted to go back to school. She watched me sympathetically and then she told my mother to let me go to school. I found out if I went back to school I would have to go to work to buy my shoes and clothes. So I began to sell newspapers on the streets in Savannah, and I got one or two odd jobs. The first job I remember getting paid me \$1.50 a week. This was in the summer time and I worked in a barber shop awhile, shining shoes. My job started when I began to carry a regular route for the Savannah Press, the afternoon paper.

"The paper put on a contest and gave as a prize a watch to the boy that made the best record for collections and distributions over a certain period of time, and I won the watch. This was the first watch I ever had. Because of the showing I made I was given another route. This made me carry two routes: the first in the business section of town and after that delivery was made I would go back and take on the last route, which was on the outskirts of town. I forgot to tell you that this was in 1891 when I went to Savannah to live.

"After getting these two newspaper routes it kinda solved my financial problem. I was able to buy my own shoes and clothes, which I did the rest of my life. Nobody bought me anything from that time on. I cannot recall anybody buying me one article of clothes or shoes from that time.

"I remember I always kept a job. I was never idle, nor have I been since that time. I remember a man coming in to tell me about his not having a job and said he couldn't find one. I couldn't understand it then, nor can I understand it now that men go around saying they cannot find work. It is just something I cannot understand because ever since I first

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worked as delivery boy for the newspapers in Savannah, I have had more jobs than I could do. If it wasn't one thing it was another; if it wasn't the kind of work I liked and was all I could get, I did that until I could do better and I usually found a better one.

"Now in buying me clothes I would go into a store, pick out a pair of shoes that suited me for \$3, \$4, or \$5 and then I'd pay \$1 down on that pair of shoes, let them wrap them up, and give me a bill for them, then I would pay \$1 until I got them out. I did the same way with my suits. I began to buy my suits of clothes at B.H. Levy & Company, a firm on Broughton Street, in Savannah. As I tell you this I am reminded of the fact that I have two daughters who are teaching at the Georgia State College there in Savannah and they go to the same store and get any amount of clothes they want. They get them on their name and this because of my record I established there. They trade at the very same store.

"Well, I worked for the Savannah newspaper until I finished grammar school, completing the elementary course at the West Broad Street School in June 1897. After that I came to Atlanta. My mother had moved back to 5 Atlanta, having preceded me. I worked in Savannah until I finished school and then came to Atlanta to join my mother. I wanted to go to school some more but there wasn't much visible opportunity at that time. After I got here I went out on a farm in the summer of 1897 and worked. Although I was only fifteen years old, I worked in the field as a farm hand, chopping cotton, picking peaches, and any other work that was done by the farm hands. I was paid fifty cents a day like the other farm hands for such common labor. I remember I was working out there barefooted, with nothing but a cap on my head, out in that sunshine all day long and I worked right along keeping up with the men and received the same they received for the work.

"I saved my money that summer and came back to Atlanta, expecting to go in school that fall. My mother took down sick and I had to use the money I had saved for my mother. Then a thing happened which you might call a 'break'. Reverend E. J. Fisher was pastor of the Mt. Olive Baptist Church here in Atlanta. He later went to Chicago as pastor of the Clivet Baptist Church, where he remained until his death. This is the same church which

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Reverend L. K. Williams, President of the National Baptist Convention pastored. Well, Reverend Fisher was a wonderful character. He was a great humanitarian. Reverend Fisher took me along with his children out to Morehouse College, which was at that time the Atlanta Baptist College, in the fall of 1897. He paid my tuition to enter the first year academy. It was my academy then. I was able to get a job with Dr. J. F. McDougail, college physician, who also ran a drugstore in the city. I worked in the drugstore, opening up in the morning at six o'clock 6 and working until eight o'clock. I would then ride my bicycle to school and come back and work in the afternoons until ten or eleven o'clock at night. I did this for four years - through academy. I won a scholarship which paid my tuition for the other years. I finished the academy in 1901. I went back to school that fall in the Freshman Class. I stayed a few months and because of My Mother's failing health and many needs I dropped out of school and went to work to help her.

"I took a civil service examination, was certified for an appointment as a sub-railway mail clerk in September of 1903, and I remained in the railway mail service for thirty-two years, starting in at grade '1' and for the last eight years in the service I was clerk in charge of my crew at grade '6', highest grade in the railway mail service, which carried with it the maximum pay.

"June 1, 1935, I voluntarily accepted optional retirement from the railway mail service. This was optional retirement after thirty years or more of service.

"The fact that I stopped college didn't stop my thirst for knowledge. I went to the libraries and read intensively along three lines of my choice: literature, history, and philosophy.

"I married, in June 1906, Miss Irene Ophelia Thompson, a native of Columbus, Mississippi. To this union were born six daughters. All are living. After their birth I was determined that they should have every advantage, every one I missed, and more. I guess my denial of many things during my youth caused me to be more determined. The first four daughters are graduates of Spelman College. Two of these girls were graduated from 7

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Spelman as valedictorian of their class. All four of them have earned masters' degrees - two from Columbia University, one from Atlanta University, and the other from European universities. This daughter, my oldest, became head of the French Department at Spelman College, a position she kept until her marriage. Another of my daughters was head of the English Department at Jackson College, in Jackson, Mississippi, and she held this position until her marriage. One of my single daughters is head of the English Department and Dramatics at the Georgia State College, Savannah, Georgia, and the other is head of the Home Economics Department at the same school. My two younger daughters are in high school. One of my daughters finished Spelman College at the age of nineteen years and held her masters' degree at twenty years. She was able to get a job because of that right away at the age of twenty years.

"Well, let's see. Another phase of my life I forgot to tell you back there is that I joined the church early, at the age of fourteen or fifteen years, in Savannah, Georgia, and have since been continually identified with some Christian church. At the present time I am trustee of the First Congregational Church in Atlanta.

In 1911 I joined the Masonic Order and became greatly enthused in the working of this fraternal organization. In three years, in 1914, I was made a Grand Lodge officer which position I held for ten years. In 1924 I was made secretary-treasurer of the Masonic Relief Association, which was the financial department of the Grand Lodge. This position I held eight years, until 1932. That position paid me a salary which was larger than the salary I was getting from the government as a railway mail clerk. I 8 held both jobs jointly and satisfactorily to all parties concerned. My work was satisfactory to the government, and the fraternal order was satisfied with my work. I needed this increase in income in order to give my children the type of education I wanted them to have. I would frequently go directly from my office to the train, where I would work all night as a railway clerk.

"My run was from Atlanta to Nashville, Tennessee. All of my service for the thirty-two years was spent on that line between Atlanta and Nashville. I don't know whether it would be

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interesting or necessary to mention here that all of the workers on this line, except me, were white men. When I was made clerk in charge there was never any friction between me and the white men. Our relations were always pleasant, and whatever difficulties arose were ironed out between us to everyone's satisfaction. We worked together beautifully.

“Speaking again of my position with the Masonic Order as secretary-treasurer, I held this position until 1932, when Dr. H. R. Butler, Grand Master for thirty-one years, died and I was elected to succeed him as head of the order in the State of Georgia. Having prepared myself for a public career through my activities and reading, I found myself circumscribed because of my work in the railway mail service, and because of a desire for a larger sphere for usefulness in order to help my race secure a ballot, I resigned from the railway mail service in June 1935, accepting optional retirement. I was then free to give my full time to the activities of the Masonic Order and to civic and political affairs.

“On February 12, 1936, I called a public meeting at Big Bethel [A.M.E.?] 9 Church and organized the Atlantic Civic and Political League, and became its first president which position I still hold. This organization, founded on Lincoln's birthday, has for its goal, or ambition, the intention to awaken the Atlanta Negroes to their civic and political consciousness, mostly the benefits to be derived from the exercise or use of the ballot. At the time of the organization of the Atlanta Civic and Political League there were less than six hundred registered Negro voters in Atlanta, Georgia. In the three years that number has been increased to nearly three thousand.

“In the fall of 1936 I accepted an invitation to join the campaign for the re-election of Franklin D. Roosevelt as President of the United States. I filled speaking engagements in the states of Rhode Island, New Jersey, Delaware, and Maryland, under the Speaker's Bureau of the Eastern Division with headquarters in Washington, D. C., working under the Democratic National Committee, Honorable James A. Farley, Chairman. I accepted this assignment and duty because of my sincere belief in the progressive principles advocated by the New Deal Administration, especially as they related and are interpreted toward the

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uplifting and betterment of living conditions for poor people regardless of race, color, or creed.

"I might add that I'm devoting quite a bit of my time to the platform as a public speaker. I was Emancipation Day Speaker for 'Wings over Jordan', a radio program heard every Sunday morning over the CBS, through station WGAR, Cleveland, under the direction of Dr. Glenn T. Settle, with the [Gethsemane?] Choir of Cleveland, with [orth?] Kramer its conductor. This is a 10 distinct honor granted my people through the CBS as it gives our ministers, educators, and leaders an opportunity which otherwise is not granted us. I would like here at this point to tell you some of the things I said in this address, that is, if it won't take too much of your time.

"The subject was 'the Negro in America'. I explained the significance of Emancipation Day by saying: 'to the twelve million Negroes of America this day has a higher signification - to us it is Emancipation Day. On January 1, 1863, in the City of Washington, President Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation which freed 3 1/2 million slaves. Today their descendants pause to commemorate that historic event with profound gratitude to God and to Abraham Lincoln.

"We first came to the New World with the early explorers. Black seamen were with Columbus in 1492. Alonzo Pietro, a Negro, was in charge of the pilot house on one of the three ships of the crew, the Nina. They were with Balboa in 1513; Cortez in Mexico in 1518. Estiveneco, a Negro, led the expedition of [1537?] which opened up the region now known as Arizona and New Mexico. A Negro member of the De Soto expedition of 1540 remained in this country and became the second settler in what is now the state of Alabama. The twenty slaves landed at Jamestown, Virginia, in 1619, arrived a year ahead of the Pilgrim fathers at Plymouth Rock. For the next 240 years Negroes were forcibly brought to America against their will.

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“the sweat from the brow of our forbears fell in railroad cuts, cotton fields, rice plantations, in the forests and along the mountain sides. Negro labor became efficient and dependable by the way in which it helped to build America.

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“the first man to fall in the Boston Massacre of 1770 was Crispus Attucks, a Negro, who died for American ideals six years before the signing of the Declaration of Independence. Peter Salem was another to distinguish himself at the Battle of Bunker Hill. Five thousand Negroes saw service in the Continental Army under General Washington.

“In the Civil War, 200,000 fought in the Federal Army for their own freedom and the preservation of the Union. Three million slaves made crops by day and protected homes by night, of their masters who were fighting to keep them in bondage. Such loyalty and devotion have never been surpassed by any people in any period of history. In the World War 380,000 were enrolled - 200,000 of whom saw service in France. The Negro has fought valiantly in every American War and has yet to produce a traitor to the flat!

“In this short time our race has accumulated two billion dollars worth of property, including 22 million acres of farm land, an aggregate area larger than the five states of Maine, Vermont, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, and Connecticut.

“In the midst of slavery, the Negro accepted from his master the Christian religion with the faith of a child. Today he counts over 40,000 churches with a membership of 5 1/2 million souls.

“In 1860 90 per cent could neither read nor write. By 1930 this illiteracy was reduced to 16 per cent. Today 2,500 are finishing American colleges annually. Considering this achievement, we cannot give too much credit to the white Christian missionaries who came South following the Civil war to help educate the Negro. Their task was one of sacrifice and consecration. The memory of these good people should never be forgotten.

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“ ‘In turn Negro men and women became teachers themselves. Quite a few, like Booker Washington, rose above tremendous obstacles to become useful educators. J. B. Watson, reared on a Texas farm and unable to finish high school until 25, worked from more years, entered Brown University at 29, and graduated at 33. Today he is the honored President of the State College for Negroes of Arkansas.

“ ‘Professor Fletcher Henderson, father of the famous band leader, has been teaching continuously for 58 years at [Cuthbert?], Georgia. Professor George H. Green, Douglas High School, Lexington, Missouri, has been teaching continuously for 59 years. During the past 52 years he has not been tardy or absent a single day from his post of duty. These are but examples of many others. In South Carolina alone there are 14 Negro teachers with more than 50 years of service.

“ ‘today man, white people of the South, where most of the Negroes live, are seriously interested in his education. Accredited high schools and colleges are being rapidly equipped and financed from public funds. The results are both encouraging and gratifying.

“ ‘Over the doorway of the nation's Supreme Court Building in Washington, D. C. are engraved four words, ‘Equal Justice Under Law’. This beautiful American ideal is what the Negroes want to see operative and effective from the Atlantic to the Pacific and from the Great Lakes to the Gulf - nothing more or less. They want equal rights and protection in the courts, in the streets, and on the farms; they want equal opportunities to work at every honorable trade and profession; equal opportunity to cast a ballot in all elections, everywhere. These fundamental rights and privileges, guaranteed by the Federal Constitution and its amendments, constitute the aims, the hopes, and the desires of the Negroes of America today and tomorrow! ’

“I'm the guest speaker for the Emancipation Proclamation Celebration to be held in Baltimore, Maryland on Sunday, January 14. At the same time the Governor, Honorable

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Herbert R. O'Connor of Maryland, and the Mayor, Honorable Howard [W. Hackson?] of Baltimore, will be present to extend greetings.

"I tell you these things because I got a great deal of pleasure out of coming in close association with the leaders of our great country, and it gives me opportunity to let my race benefit by these associations.

"I have a great love for people's human rights; I believe in equal opportunities for all mankind. I am a great admirer of the lives of Abraham Lincoln, Booker Washington, and Frederick Douglass, because they portray the lives of poor boys who believed in human rights and brotherhood of all mankind.

"I forgot to mention that one time I [did?] insurance work. This was after my family began to grow and I found I needed more money. I wrote insurance for a while and then I became a stock salesman for the company. These things happened before I took the job with the fraternal organization. From this work I learned a lot about people and earned money enough to help me along. So you see I believed that there were many things 14 one can do to help himself. I am a great believer in self-help. All I wanted was an opportunity to work. To further bring out just how I have always felt in this matter, I will give you an expression, an original saying I wrote down twenty-five or thirty years ago, and I have used somewhat as a motto: "I cannot conquer death; all other fights I win.' As yet I don't recall having lost any. They way have been hard fights but I won them eventually. Another thing I've kept in mind and have made a part of my thoughts: 'You sow a thought and reap an act, You sow an act and reap a habit, You sow a habit and reap a character, You sow character and reap destiny.'

Another expression I got a great lesson from is: 'two prisoners looked out from behind the bars of their cell; one saw mud and other saw the stars.' That is true in life. One sees what one permits his eyes to see. If he looks down it's the mud and if he looks up, it's the stars. I have always tried to look up. "My most favorite poem is one by Edwin Markham, 'the Man

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with the Hoe', said to be written by him after he saw the world famous painting by Millet. I repeat that poem over and over from time to time and throughout my life I have gotten so much from it. (He recited the poem and he drew a beautiful mental picture of that man who stood there leaning on his hoe. He quoted the poem, every word of it, which proved that he has a most unusual retentive memory). "I don't see where I've done so much and, too, to talk about one's self it takes away the actual thing and purpose for which it is said - too many I's detract but I will say I came from a very, very poor beginning 15 with very little to back me in my ambitions and whatever I have accomplished, if there is anything, I have done if from sheer determination and because I looked up and saw the stars. I have struggled to be useful to mankind. I say often, 'It's what one sets his mind to accomplish that he accomplishes and one cannot just sit by and wait for opportunities to be poured in his lap. He must go out and help make them and then take advantage of all that pass his way. That in what I did. I went out and looked for my opportunities, with my eyes on the stars, and took advantage of all I found. I didn't sit idly by and wait, just because I came of very poor parents who separated when I was still a baby, and left me with relatives who were too poor to give but the barest necessities to the members of the large household. I made up my mind at an early age to do something and I guess I can sum it all up by saying I can compare myself with the two ships: 'One ship sails east, the other sails west by the same wind that blows. It's the set of the sail and not the gale that determines the course as she goes.' I set my 'sails' to rise above poverty and ignorance and whatever the 'gale' I still kept my mind on what I wanted to accomplish in life, and each day I have tried to do those things that would reflect credit on me, my family, and my race. I have devoted my life and my talents to helping pave the right road for my people."